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The Arkansas Traveller

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ARKANSAS TRAVELLER

BY
THOMAS WILSON
U. S. National Museum, Washington, D. C.

Columbus, Ohio
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The Arkansas Traveller

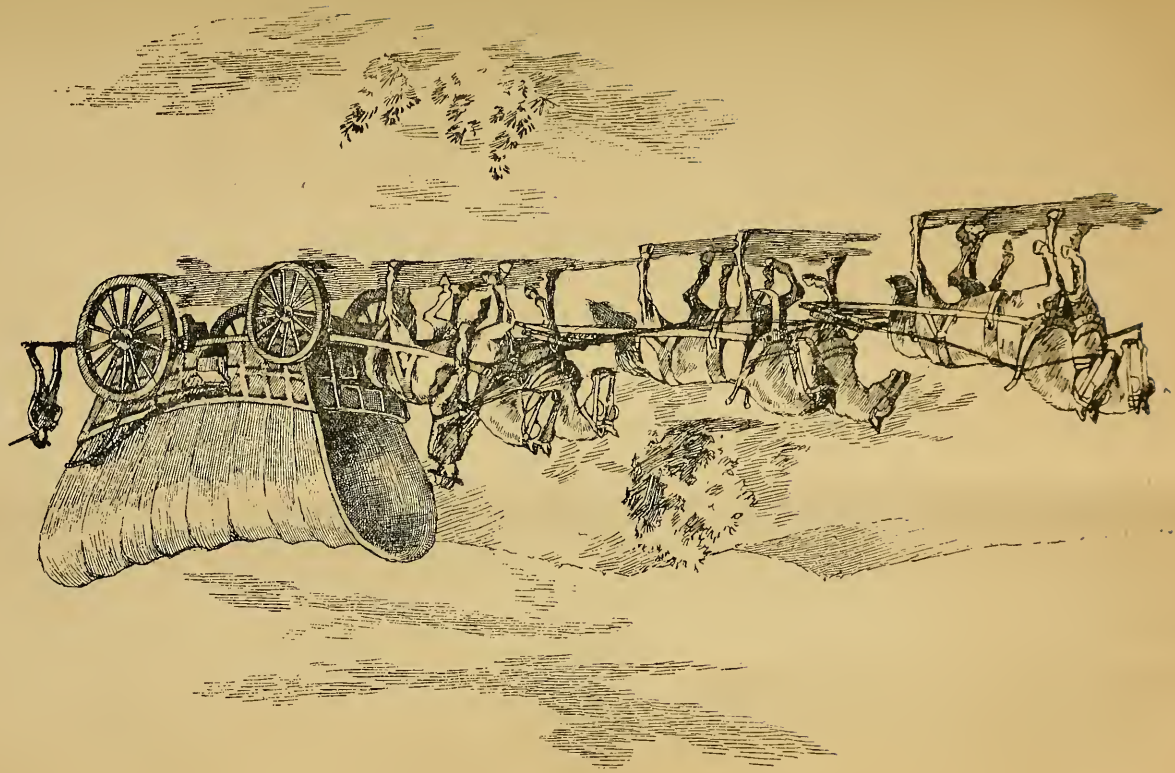
Some years of my teens were passed in the town of Salem, Columbiana county, Ohio. This was before any railroads passed through that country. I remember the first meeting of citizens ever held there (under the direction of Mr. Zadok Street) for the purpose of securing subscriptions of money or right-of-way for the construction of what was then to be the Ohio & Pennsylvania Railway, afterwards the Crestline, and finally the Pittsburg, Fort Wayne & Chicago R. R. The natural highways for travel in Ohio were by the Ohio River on the south and Lake Erie on the north. The artificial water communication on the east was by the Pennsylvania Canal from Beaver to Erie, with a branch from Newcastle to Cleveland. In the center of Ohio was the great Ohio Canal from Cleveland to Portsmouth.

The paralellogram within these borders was served with travel, for passengers by the Ohio Stage Company, and for freight by the Conestoga wagons which had been in use from Philadelphia westward over the mountains before the building of the Western Division of the Pennsylvania Canal and the construction of the Portage Railroad over the mountains. Pittsburg and Wheeling were the great centers for western distribution of goods, while Beaver and Wellsville were, from their position on the Ohio river, and the consequent communication with them by steamboat, subsidiary centers. The distribution from these points was accomplished by these great wagons on certain roads, in which the road, the route and the wagons almost corresponded to the great caravans of Oriental times.

The wagons were immense lumbering machines with broad tires three to five inches in width and an inch in thickness. The boxes or bodies were like unto the later "Prairie Schooners;" the keel was not straight as is usual at the present day, but highly

curved, being low in the center or middle of the wagon and high in the air at the front and back. The body was of framework mortised together, the slats, both horizontal and perpendicular, conformed in curve to their respective body-pieces and standards in that they increased, and made the top end of the body to be higher and longer than was the bottom of the foundation. (See cut). They were provided with bows and covered with sail-cloth, an efficient protection against rain. The wagon had what was then called a "patent Lock," now so common as to have lost the terms "patent" and "lock" both, and become a "brake." The handle of the brake was managed by the driver from the ground. Occasionally it swung back and forth over the hind wheel and was pulled down by the weight of the driver and fastened with a chain to a spike or hook; occasionally it was at the rear of the wagon and was pushed from side to side and kept in place by a ratchet. The pole of these wagons was known as "stiff," that is it was fastened solid into the front hounds and did not fall to the ground, nor was it supported by the horses' necks. It was only used to steer and hold back, for which purpose long chains were fastened to its ends and attached by breast-chains to the hames.

The bodies of these wagons were set on bolsters and, of course, without springs. This, with their curve, brought them low in the center and gave the front wheels but little play in turning. The great length and weight of the wagon, with its six horses, made it a machine as unwieldy to turn or steer as a steamboat. The six horses were hitched to the wagon thus: the wheel horses with double and single trees fastened to the tongue and hounds by means of hammer and hammer-strap, the former serving as a bolt or pin; the middle leaders were hitched to double and single trees which hung by the middle hook in the iron loop at the end of the pole. From the same loop the lead-chain was hooked which, stretched between the middle leaders, received the hook of the double trees of the leaders. The driver used but a single line fastened to the bridle-rein of the near lead-horse. The lefthand side was the "near" side, the other the "off" side. The middle span of horses were the "middle leaders," the rear ones the "wheel horses." The near wheel



horse carried the saddle for the driver, on which he could mount as occasion demanded, but he rarely did. In driving, he walked by the side of the near wheel horse, carrying in his hand his Loudoun County black-snake whip, the single line attached to the lead horse being continually within reach. The rear end of the line was buckled to the hame of the wheel horse, high up, and was about long enough to clear the ground as it swung; when it was not in use its slack was hung over the hame. The line was used to guide the horses, more as a signal than by actual force. To pull it steadily without jerk means for the lead horse to come "haw" (to the left); two or three short jerks meant for him to go "gee" (to the right). By these signals, with the aid of his voice, the driver had perfect command of his team. The horses were large and heavy, the smallest span in the lead. Their motion was slow and dignified; each one seemed to lose his individuality, recognizing that he was only a unit in a great machine, and he acted accordingly. No horse ever seemed to take upon himself any individual action, he worked harmoniously with the rest, therefore a stranger had no control over the team and could neither drive nor manage them. They did not refuse to do his bidding, they simply ignored his existence. Occasionally a horse, being (as the indictments say) "moved and instigated by the devil," would grow sulky and balk. This was usually a new or untrained horse, frequently one sold or traded by the farmer or jockey on account of this very fault. Then came the contest between him and his driver, in which the latter must win or kill the horse; and cases of obstinacy have been known wherein he had to do the latter in order to accomplish the former.

The wagons were greased with tar. To perform the operation the wheel was usually pried up with a fence rail put under the axle until a bit of plank of the right height could be put under, which was kept from pressing into the ground by having a bit of board as a foundation. Two lengths of plank were required, one for the hind and one for the front wheel, and these were usually kept at the tavern for common use. The wheels were fastened on with linchpins which went through the extreme out end of the axle, and not with nuts and screws as in

later times. The linchpin was taken out with the hammer, the end of the handle of which was kept sharpened chisel-fashion for that purpose. The tar kettle swung on a hook fastened to the hind axle. A tool box was on the near side of the wagon body in the middle (shown in the cut) and contained a hatchet, wrench, gimlet, etc., etc., such as experience showed was needed.

The teams were usually owned by their drivers, who took care of them themselves. Some of the more celebrated teamsters on the road through to New Lisbon, Salem, Youngstown, were Berry Goodwin, Milo Grove, the Sell Brothers, Tom Williamson. There were others who were only occasionally on the road. Jake Sell was the best known and continued his work latest with his team reduced to five, and then to four, horses, until his trade was taken away entirely by the opening of the Ohio and Pennsylvania R. R. I remember the trip wherein he became celebrated for hauling over the road the heaviest load ever known; five tons and nearly a half (108 hundredweight). The horses wore great heavy harness, with straps and breeching four and five inches in width, made of double, and sometimes triple, plies of leather sewed together, and would last longer than the horses; collars and hames were correspondingly large and heavy, the latter always of wood and standing high above the collar. A leather, or goat-, sheep- or bear-skin shield or cape, with wool or fur outside, sometimes dyed in fancy colors, blue or red, was worn over the horses' withers to protect them from the rain and prevent them from chafing, which would happen if the rain was allowed to get under the collar. Holes were cut in these shields which fitted the protruding ends of the hames, and thus they were kept in place without further fastening. The bridle reins were hooked over the hames outside the capes.

Many teams wore bells, usually three to each horse; they were attached to a steel or iron bow, the ends of which, brought together, were inserted into two projecting loops or keepers on the upright ends of each hame. The stepping motion of the horse kept up a continual ringing of the bells, which made music for the driver and could be heard in the stillness of the summer day through the adjoining fields, attracting the attention of every boy, and man too, within a mile of the road. The bells

were of different sizes, the center one in the arch being the size of a small cow bell, the outside ones being smaller and, if there were five in the row, they were about the size of a sheep bell. They were attuned in harmony and thus made a concord of sweet sounds. It was only the well-to-do driver with an æsthetic taste who indulged in bells. Every boy along the road knew Jake Sell's bell-team and could tell whether it had passed up or down, and when. A tradition was told me by my father of a rich old wagoner, Whittenberry, who owned ten teams, all with bells. As they went out from the depot or starting point, several together, the old man listened to the harmonious tones of the jingling bells as they took from the stately tread of the dignified horses a regular rhythm which to his delighted ear resolved itself into words (as does the ticking clock, sometimes), that gratified his proud old heart as they seemed to chant to him in unison: "Whittenberry's ten teams, Whittenberry's ten teams, Whittenberry's ten teams." One of the rules of the road was that no driver should ever pass a stalled team without helping it. A gentleman with a lady might pass and leave them without remark, but a mere or common man, never! I have seen a procession of teams, heavy and light, standing in line while their drivers were helping a brother in difficulty. In the case of bell teams, the penalty or salvage, so to speak, for this aid, was their bells, which the unfortunate driver had to take from off his horses and give to the team that had assisted him.

These teams had their regular routes of travel and every boy along the line knew the team by the appearance of the wagon, the number and color of the horses, and so was able to identify the individual team from any field in the farm as soon as the wagon made its appearance over the hills. There were many of these teams in operation. The wagoners were compelled to stop early enough to groom their horses before it became too dark to work. They began their journey early in the morning and usually made a distance of fifteen, never more than twenty, miles a day. As far as possible, they had their regular stopping places, although they rarely allowed the latter to curtail the day's journey. Arrived at the stopping-

place, the horses were taken out, stripped of their harness, watered, fed, curried, etc. The wagoner carried a big feed box swung from hooks and chains to the back part of his wagon; this he lifted clear from its place, put up the end of the wagon tongue with a light St. Andrew's cross of wood which he carried with him and fastened the feed trough on the tongue by inserting the hook in the front end of the trough into a corresponding slot or keeper in the tongue; while the rear end was kept in place by a corresponding strap with a hole in it which received the wagon hammer, the double-trees being taken off and disposed of under the wagon. The horses were fastened to the pole or the trough and stood out all night. They were driven into the great wagon-yard for this purpose, and it was not unusual to see, at a popular station or tavern, five or six of these great ships of travel (pioneers of civilization) arranged around the wagon-yard. The wagoner always, or nearly always, bought his feed from the tavern keeper by the bushel, and fed as much or as little as he pleased.



The wagoners ate at the table with other guests, travelers, gentlemen, ladies, what-not, for they were just as good as anybody else. But it was not usual for them to occupy either bed or room at the tavern; they carried their own beds in the form of a mattress, containing all the clothes necessary for warmth and, being rolled together and strapped, was placed in the front of the wagon, the cover being drawn tightly over it. These rolls of bedding were brought into the tavern in the early evening, but stacked in the corner of the bar-room until bed-time, when they were unrolled and straightened out on the floor, the places being chosen by pre-emption, "first come, first served." After supper, and from that till bed-time, these bar-rooms were scenes of fun and frolic.

The stations on the road from Pittsburg to Salem I remember well: Backhouse Tavern, Sewickly, Economy, Freedom, Bridgewater, Douthit's, Darlington, Palestine, Roose's, Colum-

biana, Franklin Square, Salem. There were three taverns in Salem: Webb's Tavern at the western, Wilson's in the center, and the Golden Fleece at the eastern side of the town. This last was originally kept by an old settler, Aaron Hise. He had a large family mostly grown to man- and womanhood. The oldest one became a celebrated steamboat builder at New Albany, Indiana. These were all sober, temperate, industrious and proper men and women. They obtained a good education. The men all became excellent mechanics and skilled artisans. The family were noble men and women and made the best of citizens. They were all musicians or, at least, had musical genius. The girls could sing, and many a day I have worked full ten hours with Howell Hise, listening to his singing and whistling, and finished the evening with a concert of our own at Hinchellwood's, where Jesse played the clarionet, George Hinchellwood and I the flutes, while Phoebe and Lizzie sang.

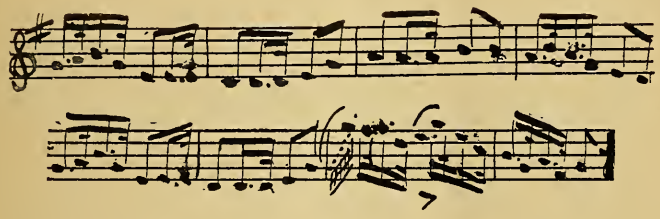
Each of the taverns standing along the road naturally exerted itself to present the greatest attractions to the traveller in order to secure the greatest amount of custom. The chief attraction in early times at the "Golden Fleece" was the music, the *chef d'oeuvre* of which was considered to be the "Arkansas Traveller." The residents always kept their attention upon any night when it was likely this play would be enacted, and if it should get out through the town that this was to be given, that night would surely see the old bar-room packed to the utmost.

The horses fed and cared for, supper over, the rows of bedding brought in and stacked in the corner, the big table which stood against the wall brought out into the center of the room, and one of the boys (it made slight difference which) mounted thereon seated on any kind of a broken-backed or no-backed chair, and commenced to play the first part of the tune. After playing it once or twice to familiarize the new members of his audience, he prefaced the performance with an explanation, a sort of prologue, that which would be called in our modern librettos, the "Argument." It was, according to my remembrance, about as follows:

The scene represented, the *locale*, is in Arkansas, and he (the player) is to represent an Arkansas squatter (a fiddler)

who has been down the Mississippi river to New Orleans and had, of course, attended the theater. He has heard for the first time this tune, "The Arkansas Traveller," played by the theater orchestra. He was enraptured with it; it made an impression upon him, and he did his best to remember it so that he could play it, but his fiddle was at home and his "best" was by whistling and drumming and otherwise to impress it upon his memory.

The opening of the story represents this Arkansas squatter, just returned from his trip to New Orleans, and his first move is to get down his fiddle and attempt to reproduce the tune. He has already picked out the first part, but the second is too much for him and he fails in it. Therefore he is compelled to content himself by playing the first part only.



While he is engaged in playing it over and over and over again, the "Arkansas Traveller" makes his appearance and the play begins. So one of the boys would play this in different keys and to different time; improvising right and left in it, playing it high and low as a master *improvisator* could be expected, but the last part of the tune continually evaded him. While thus engaged, his brother would enter the room dressed in the guise of a Traveller, and make his way up to the front part of the circle around the player, who would stop a little, maybe to tune a string, straighten the bridge or tighten the nut on his bow, when the alleged stranger asks him a question.

Of course I cannot remember the entire dialogue — I do not know that it was ever given twice in the same way. It was largely a matter of improvisation, depending upon the skill and ability of the players, the humor they were in, the time at their command, and the extent to which the audience could

arouse the enthusiasm of the players. The first question was by the traveller:

Traveller: "How do you do, stranger?"

Squatter: "Do pretty much as I please, sir." (Plays first part only.)



Traveller: "Stranger, do you live about here?"

Squatter: "I reckon I don't live anywheres else!" (Plays first part only.)

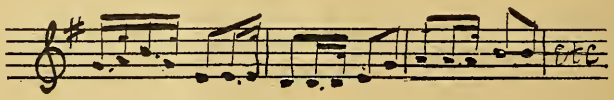
Traveller: "Well, how long have you lived here?"

Squatter: "See that big tree there? Well, that was there when I came here." (Plays first part.)



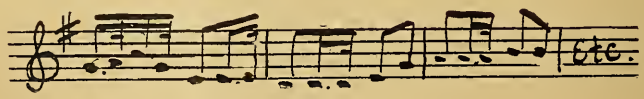
Traveller: "Well, you needn't be so cross about it; I wasn't asking no improper questions at all!"

Squatter: "Reckon there's nobody cross here except yourself!" (Plays first part only.)



Traveller (proposing a modification): "How did your potatoes turn out here last year?"

Squatter: "They didn't turn out at all; we dug 'em out." (Plays first part only.)



Traveller: "Can I stay here all night?"

Squatter: "Yes, you kin stay right where you air, out en the road." (Plays first part.)

Traveller: "How far is it to the next tavern?"

Squatter: "I reckon it's upward of some distance." (Plays first part.)

Traveller: "How long will it take for me to get there?"

Squatter: "You'll not git there at all, if ye stay here foolin' with me." (Plays, always first part.)

Traveller: "Got any spirits in your house?"

Squatter: "Do you think my house is haunted? Plenty of 'em down in the grave-yard!" (Plays.)

Traveller: "How far is it to the forks of the road?"

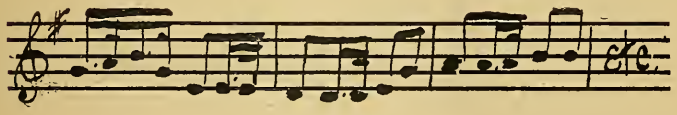
Squatter: "Hit haint forked sence I've been here." (Plays.)

Traveller: "Where does this road go to?"

Squatter: "Hit haint gone anywhere sence I've been here — jist staid right here." (Plays.)

Traveller: "Why don't you put a new roof on your house?"

Squatter: "Because it's a rainin' and I can't." (Plays.)

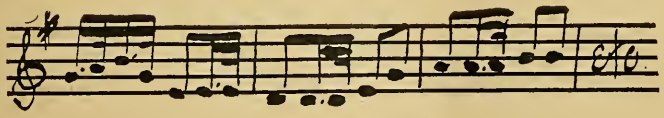


Traveller: "Why don't you do it when it is not raining?"

Squatter: "It don't leak then." (Plays, etc.)

Traveller: "Can I get across the branch down here?"

Squatter: "I reckon you can, the ducks cross there whenever they want to." (Plays.)



Traveller: "Why don't you play the rest of that tune?"

The player stopped quick as lightning.

"Gee, stranger, can *you* play the rest of that tune? I've been down to New Orleans and I heard that at the theater, and I've been at work at it ever since I got back, trying to get the last part of it. If you can play the rest of that tune, you can stay in this cabin for the rest of your natural life. Git right down, hitch your horse and come in! I don't care if it is a rainin'! I don't care if the beds is all full! We'll make a shake-down on the floor and ye can kiver with the door. We haint got much to eat, but what we have, you're mighty welcome to it. Here, Sal, old woman, fly round and git some corn-dodgers and bacon for the gentleman, — he knows how to play the last part of that tune! Don't you, stranger — didn't you say you did? Gol, though, you don't go back on it now! If you say you don't there'll be some of the wildest sawin' around here you ever seed. If you want to save your life, you want to know the rest of that tune, and quick, too! Out with it! Do you know it, or don't you know it? Git down off'n 'at hoss! If you know it, you are a friend and 'brother-come-to-me-arms'; if you don't you've excited the tiger in my bosom, and I'll have nothing short of your heart's blood! Git down, git down!"

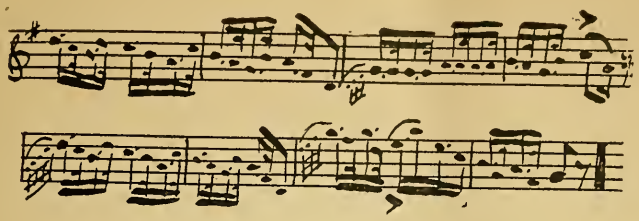
"Well," the stranger said, "yes, I can play it; there's no use of your getting mad. I'll play it for you as soon's I get something to eat."

Squatter: "Fly 'round here, old woman, set the table, bring out the knives and forks."

Here the little boy was to put in his oar and say: "Daddy, you know we haven't got any forks, and there aint knives to go 'round."

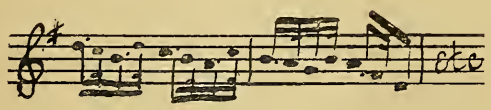
Squatter: "Like to know why there 'aint! There's big butch and little butch, and short handle and corn-cob handle, and no handle at all, and if that 'aint knives enough to set any gentleman's table in this country, I would like to know! Git off'n your hoss, stranger, and come in and have someth'n', and then play the rest of that tune."

The result of it is that the stranger gets off, takes the seat of the squatter and the fiddle, and then starts in playing the last part of the tune,



but he refuses to play the first part.

Then the squatter becomes interested and begins plying questions to the stranger; where he comes from, who he is, where he is going, where he got that tune, what is the name of it, who made it, and everything of that kind; to all of which the stranger replies with as much imperturbability as is possible, and in the same style as he had been replied to when he came; that is, he gave the answers as short as might be, and then ended the discussion by playing the tune, always and only the second part.



I have known this to last for an hour, and I have never seen an audience go away from any entertainment better pleased than were the denizens of the town of Salem, were they guests, travellers or wagoners, when was played, in this simple and country style, the drama of "THE ARKANSAS TRAVELLER."

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